

# THE MESOAMERICAN BIOLOGICAL CORRIDOR: LINKING INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES

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## Summary

The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC) is a unique conglomeration of regional politics, international environmental priorities, and decades of global experience in protected area establishment and management that is being implemented throughout the nations, bioregions and communities of Central America. How it began as Paseo Pantera and developed to its present form as a framework for sustainable development with global support is an instructive case study in regional planning and institutional development for sustainability. Yet, it is likely to have a much smaller and less beneficial effect on environmental conservation and human and social development in the region than originally envisaged. The most evident cause for this pessimistic conclusion are the absence of a strong unifying vision and principles for the Corridor and in a failure to pass information and resources between the myriad organizations at international, national and local levels. The consequent coordination failure threatens to defeat the original purpose of the Corridor project.

International, national and local Corridor projects and programs have developed simultaneously, but guidance and assistance and rates of progress vary substantially. As this occurs, communication among stakeholders becomes a crucial indicator of the

potential for success. This article reviews project development and implementation within the MBC, analyzes its strengths and weaknesses, and identifies opportunities for improvement. It also shows what other countries and regions can learn from this intricate international coordination of multiple national and sub-national projects.

## 1. Introduction

The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC) began as a program to strengthen and link protected areas throughout Central America. Originally a conservation initiative, the MBC is now an institutional framework for sustainable development on an international scale. As this transformation has occurred, the size and numbers of organizations and the amount of money involved in the MBC has soared. The MBC is currently an international priority overseen by governments and large international institutions. However, the actual projects that comprise the Corridor are implemented on the ground by governments, local communities, NGOs and indigenous peoples. The relationship of these groups is key to the MBC's success. Regardless of the long-term results of the initiative, the multi-level institutional structure and implementation of the Corridor holds many lessons for the future of sustainable development within ecosystems that cross international boundaries.



Figure 1. Conceptual MBC Map, including land-use and indigenous populations

The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor is a unique conglomeration of regional politics, international environmental priorities, and decades of global experience in protected area establishment and management. At its simplest, the MBC is an international initiative to establish a contiguous stretch of protected and sustainably managed land from Colombia through Mexico (see Figure 1). Proponents and stakeholders profess that this initiative can protect biodiversity by expanding and enhancing national protected area systems and linking them with corridors of land where sustainable use

activities are practiced. This mosaic of conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity is being implemented with the stated goal of preserving Central American natural and cultural heritage and offering a better life for Central American citizens including the 13 to 19 percent of the population that belongs to indigenous cultures.

The sheer size and scope of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor distinguishes it from other similar projects and programs. According to related research 20,831,408 hectares (39.8% of Central America), representing Central America's diverse ecosystems are considered part of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. In addition to the political and scientific challenges ahead, the MBC affects several economic sectors, including agriculture, forestry, tourism, and energy. Currently, projects contributing to the Corridor range from creating incentives for people to emigrate from lands designated for conservation, remediation, or preservation to projects promoting the production and sale of organic and traditionally grown agricultural products.

International institutions such as the World Bank, United Nations, and the Global Environment Facility, along with bilateral agencies, foundations, and non-governmental organizations, have contributed between US\$60 and 100 million to the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. Despite this substantial funding for projects, the Corridor lacks a singular vision, physical map, and specific objectives. A major project to assist in the consolidation of the MBC is underway or under consideration in every nation in Central America and Colombia. An eight-year project designed and implemented by the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Environment Program and the Central American Commission for Environment and Development is also in progress. This project was designed to establish the national institutional capacity to consolidate and manage the Corridor at an international level. There are ongoing national projects designed to contribute to the international initiative, yet there is no comprehensive international program in place. This has been a source of criticism of the Corridor. The absence of a regional coordinating structure for Corridor activities inhibits the sharing of information and experiences among national and local projects and does not allow for harmonization of goals, policies and products. Support for the Corridor from Central American citizens and local and indigenous groups is also hampered by the disparate visions and goals of the projects.

The Corridor's stakeholders recognize the challenges inherent in a program of this magnitude. The widest possible range of approaches to conservation and development can be seen in Corridor projects reflecting a remarkable acceptance of decentralized project design and management. While originally an idea to strengthen enforcement and management of protected areas, the prevailing vision of the MBC now includes the use of all available mechanisms to promote conservation, development, and long-term financing. Certain characteristics of Central America's largest conservation areas and important wild areas mandate the adaptation and innovation of approaches to conservation and development. For instance many of Central America's protected areas are inhabited by indigenous people or migrant farmers. Research has shown that the rural poor, those intended to benefit most from the Corridor and those that might best assist in many aspects of its implementation, often have little knowledge of its components and progress. A series of consultations with the intention of clarifying local needs and opportunities for Corridor projects has been performed with

communities and local groups. The results of these official meetings has been mixed. The observed result has been that though information may have been gathered, the consultations may not have been conducted on a wide enough scale and those consulted do not have an adequate voice in the design and implementation of Corridor-related projects. To attract long-term international and national political and financial support, the needs of the inhabitants of the Corridor must be considered.

Despite these advancements and realizations, the implementation of the Corridor is far from complete. Institutions, organizational relationships, strategies, and objectives for the Corridor are still being discussed. Projects have been designed and are operational at all levels to ensure that the Corridor is put into action with consideration for the improvement of the lives of Central America's inhabitants. This concern, according to the implementing agency for the Corridor, the Central American Commission for Environment and Development, includes actions seeking to reconcile the economic needs of communities and nations with the long term use and viability of the ecosystems that helped to make Central America a priority for bilateral and global institutions.

Because of its scale a high level of political, financial, and technical support is needed to coordinate these activities at multiple levels of aggregation from local community to international region. The MBC is now an officially sanctioned priority of the regions' governments and funds and expertise are flowing into the region from bilateral donors, multilateral banks, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and scientific organizations. But the most critical aspect of the Corridor is the complex system of communication and coordination through all levels of society to reconcile local needs to the vision of an international Corridor that simultaneously fosters social and economic development and ecological conservation

## **2. The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor and Intergovernmental Organizations**

This section assesses the role of intergovernmental organizations and institutions in the formation and development of the MBC. The most important is the Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD) but various United Nations bodies have significantly influenced processes and decisions.

### **2.1. The Central American Commission for Environment and Development**

This organization oversees all MBC activities. It was created in 1989 following the Central American Peace Agreement in 1987 and the commitments therein. The Commission was launched to "establish a regional regime of cooperation for the optimal and rational use of the natural resources of Central America, control pollution, and reestablish ecological equilibrium, in order to guarantee a high quality of life for the population of the isthmus." Each country has one representative on CCAD and the Commission staff supports work in the core programs of biodiversity (MBC and marine and coastal resources), environmental law (harmonization of policies and practices and commitments to international environmental agreements), and provides necessary information. CCAD also coordinates all foreign aid for Central American sustainable development projects.

Although the nations agreed in 1992 to work towards a Central American System of Protected Areas (SICAP, no international framework was created within which to implement CCAD programs. No institutional framework and no single statement of environmental principles endorsed by the governments of Central America existed to guide the Commission's work, and the MBC was not yet endorsed in its present form. It only emerged later from early experiences.

Perhaps in response to this realization, as well as to the momentum caused by the UNCED in 1992 and the signing of the global Convention on Biological Diversity, the nations of Central America embarked on an ambitious series of summits and diplomatic meetings. Thus, in addition to signing the Convention on Biological Diversity, between 1992 and 1994 the nations of Central America signed the Agreement for Biodiversity Conservation and Protection of Priority Wild Areas in Central America (1992), the Regional Convention on Climate Change (1993), and held the Central American Ecological Summit in 1994.

The 1994 Ecological Summit produced the Alliance for Sustainable Development in the Americas (ALIDES), which was the first Central American agreement to specifically call for a biological corridor spanning the isthmus. In its "Compromisos en Materia de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales," ALIDES calls for a biological corridor to strengthen national protected area systems. The ALIDES was structured as an open agreement.

It was drafted and signed by Central American governments but other nations in the Americas were welcome to join and to contribute within the principles of the Alliance. The United States was the first nation from outside Central America to sign onto ALIDES and the structure of its PROARCA environmental assistance program complemented the CCAD goals as further elaborated in the Alliance. This was the beginning of a global interest in what would become the Corridor; an interest that would grow rapidly.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Craig Metrick** is a currently Director of the Corporate Benchmarking Service at the Investor Responsibility Research Center in Washington, DC applying measures of corporate social responsibility.. He has been a consultant active in environmental issues in Washington D.C. He has an M.S. in biology, environmental science and public policy from George Mason University and has worked for the US Environmental Protection Agency and as a consultant with the Smithsonian Institute and the Biodiversity Action Network, among others. He also has participated in research on biodiversity and environmental policy in the US and UK.